

Bulgakov's Unique Relationship with Stalin

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Introduction

Often the general American public perceives Stalin as a purely unwavering dictator, the head of a massive political machine, who had very little interest in the arts beyond simply repressing work that went against his politics. The true picture of Stalin is much more complex; though often a ruthless dictator, he took a strong interest in famous artists. Such is the case with Mikhaíl Afanásyevich Bulgakov, who is worthy of study based on his literary and dramatic achievements alone. It is not surprising that Stalin took a personal interest in Bulgakov. He had a very hands on approach with many Soviet writers and, according to Katerina Clark, was "in fact the country's principal censor and simultaneously its principal patron and writer's friend"^{1,2} Despite this, Bulgakov was unique because he was openly anti-soviet, and yet Stalin still seemed to tolerate and, at times, even protect and encourage Bulgakov despite his political stance. There was a personal exchange between these two historical actors that was unexpected given their political positions. Bulgakov hated the system Stalin was the head of, and yet he hoped for his endorsement. He relied on Stalin for his survival. Bulgakov never backed down from his principals of opposition to the Soviet system, though some scholars contend that he did, and he was mostly open about his views in communications with Stalin.

What led to Stalin's protection of Bulgakov is multi-faceted and, to a degree, contentious. A multitude of factors, ranging from Stalin fancying himself as a literary man to the political expediency of trying to avoid any additional politically ugly suicides of leading authors like Mayakovsky, led to Bulgakov's unique protection. No matter the motivation, Stalin chose, at times, to defend an openly anti-party figure.

¹ Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov, and Oleg V. Naumov. *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in documents, 1917-1953*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 117.

Bulgakov's relations with Stalin highlight a larger picture that, although Stalin and his government oppressed many authors, there was no clear-cut rule for the process of repression. At times, it seems Stalin valued the promise of party conversion in the arts more than pure brute force. At least he was convinced to take a softer stance toward authors by leading literary figures such as Gorky. The way famous artists were treated in the Soviet Union by Stalin and the rest of the state censorship and oppression mechanism was often handled on a case-by-case basis. This fact may explain why some of those who openly opposed the government did survive.

Bulgakov's life story preceding his literary career is reflected in his later works. Before he began pursuing a creative literary and dramatic career, he was a doctor. Bulgakov's family was linked to the Whites during Russia's revolution because his brother fought for them. Bulgakov himself was drafted to help heal their wounded during the Russian civil war. When Bulgakov found himself stuck in Red territory, he distanced himself from his former career and his open opposition to the Reds, views he had once expressed in a local newspaper during the civil war.

After the war Bulgakov set out to further pursue his literary career, and he satirized the Bolsheviks' hypocrisy and censorship, despite the fact they were now in power. He began his work during the New Economic Policy period, a time known for less repressive censorship policies in the years immediately following the revolutionary war and ending in 1928 as the more repressive Stalinist period began. Despite this relatively more liberal period, Bulgakov was still harassed during this time by Soviet critics and even the OGPU, the secret police precursor to the KGB, who confiscated his *Heart of a Dog* manuscript and his diaries in 1926. *Heart of a Dog* was one of a number of works that were critical of the Soviet regime, it addressed the None Marxist favors party official's received and how rules would be bent in their favor, in addition to

how those who earned what they had could have it taken away. As Stalin began consolidating his power, the repression of the arts became stricter and Bulgakov was often the target of party censorship as well as party loyalist attacks.

The repression Bulgakov experienced throughout his literary career caused him much woe. At many times he considered emigration or at least a “vacation” from the Soviet Union. Whether he wanted to leave Russia permanently was unclear because the records of his requests for departure are noted in correspondence sent directly to the government, sometimes even Stalin personally. They vary in their content asking, to leave temporary for health reasons or asking to immigrate, which indicates either Bulgakov’s opinion changed his want to leave or he was asking for a vacation but intended to stay elsewhere.

What is evident though is Bulgakov believed his livelihood and well-being rested on his ability to distribute his works. This was made difficult because soviet censorship and soviet literary critics constantly hounded him. Yet, because of Stalin’s interest in Bulgakov, he received a job and avoided arrest. The interest Stalin took in Bulgakov was complex. It seemed Stalin wanted to keep Bulgakov around, but not necessarily allow him to thrive. It now seems apparent that there was some hope that Bulgakov would be won over to the Bolshevik side or that he could be used as a tool for political purposes. This is the focal point of this paper's discussion, the exploration of Stalin’s motivations for preserving an anti-Soviet writer such as Bulgakov within the Soviet Union when so many lost their lives. He was unique, even when compared to other artistic greats such as Zamyatin and Pasternak, who were similar, and yet so different, in how and why they were spared by Stalin.

Stalin as a literary man

Stalin took an extraordinary interest in the arts and intelligentsia, without which the relationship between Bulgakov and Stalin would have likely never evolved. The reasons for Stalin's interest in literature are multifaceted. One would immediately point out that Stalin's relationship with literature was related to his need for control and censorship. Yet the government of the USSR had built in organs to control literature, including Narkompros formed after the revolution, Glavit formed in 1922 and in the following year Glavrepertkom was formed to censor the performing arts.³ The Soviet bureaucracy could have taken care of censorship matters, and did, but at times personal interventions were made. According to Clark, "Stalin and the Politburo intervened only when the matter concerned well known figures in art and culture and might have great resonance or yield political dividends"⁴. Many great writers fell into this category, and Bulgakov was among them.

Stalin's interest in literature seemed apparent as he consolidated power. As early as December 1928, after Trotsky's internal exile and before the complete defeat of the right opposition, the Bolshevik government made clear what the importance of literature was and how it could serve the party.

The Central Committee considers it necessary to a greater extent than heretofore to see to it that mass literature be an instrument for the mobilization of the masses around the basic political and economic tasks . . . ; for the active class education of the workers and of the wide masses of toilers in the fight against bourgeois and *petit- bourgeois* influences and survivals; for aiding the masses in conquering the achievements of science and technique; for the propaganda of Leninism and the struggle against its distortions.⁵

³ A Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928-39* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 241,247.

⁴ Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*,122

⁵Resolution of the Central Committee, On the Serving of the Mass Reader with Literature, 28 December 1928, in *Documents of Soviet History*, ed. Alex G. Cummings, Vol. 4, *Stalin Grasps Power 1926-1929* (Gulf Breeze: Academic international Press, 1998), 368

This attempt at empowering the working class to write pro-Communist literature was often referred to as the cultivation of proletarian literature. Granted this policy was not truly unique to Stalin, even under Lenin the party had literary policies that encouraged the cultivation of proletarian literature. On the, 31 May 1924 the Party on Press and Literature encouraged proletarian literature's growth but it differed by still openly supporting the fellow traveling writers.

The May 1924 Proclamation pronounced that "a very important task of the workers' press is to service both the needs of the Lenin enrollment, its training in the Bolshevik spirit, and its involvement in practical work"⁶ which echoes the 1928 document call to "mobilization of the masses." Yet the 1924 document stated, "At the same time it is necessary to continue the existing systematic support of the most gifted of the so-called fellow-travelers who are being trained in the school of work together with the Communists"⁷. This phrasing seems to indicate a change because of the exclusion of fellow travelers in the later document. By 1930, two years later, it was clear "they would reveal themselves to be revolutionary writers aligned with the proletariat, or they would pass irredeemably into the camp of class enemies."⁸ The December 1928 proclamation does not explicitly denounce fellow travelers, but it makes no mention of them and, arguably, many communists had come to see fellow-travelers as "bourgeois" and "petit-bourgeois." These labels were largely used against anyone who was perceived as anti-party. This resolution arguably marked a change in literature policy as Stalin gained power. Trotsky, Stalin's early rival for power after Lenin's death, was a greater supporter of the intelligentsia than Stalin. Trotsky stated, "It [the party] regards the literary fellow-travelers not as the

⁶ Thirteenth Party Congress ,resolution, On the Press, 31 May 1924, in *Documents of Soviet History*, ed. Rex A. Wade, Vol. 3, *Lenin's Heirs 1923-1925* (Gulf Breeze: Academic international Press, 1998), 190.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁸Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 71-72.

competitors of the writers of the working-class, but as the real or potential helpers of the working-class in the big work of reconstruction."⁹ So this new policy pronounced by the party marked a beginning of a more restrictive environment in literature following NEP.

It is in this atmosphere of increasing restrictions on authors that Stalin and Bulgakov's distant relationship evolved. Bulgakov himself expressed his fears as Trotsky fell from favor "And so, on January 1924, Trotsky was given the push. God alone knows what will happen to Russia. God help her!"¹⁰ This statement should not indicate that Bulgakov had any great love for Trotsky; during the war, he wrote, "The heroic volunteers [of the White Army] will tear the Russian land from Trotsky's hands."¹¹ Granted fear of the departure of Trotsky is years later, but Bulgakov's fears likely result from the fact that Trotsky is more of a moderate toward the intelligentsia and he fears a further clampdown on the arts and general freedoms.

Bulgakov, it should be noted, may have not necessary been considered a "fellow traveler" because he was so aligned with the Whites and against the Bolsheviks. Yet the term "fellow traveler" is quite vague. Trotsky first used it in his book *Literature and Revolution* to describe an artist who created work "more or less organically bound up with the revolution, but at the same time not the art of the revolution."¹² In some ways, Bulgakov fit this category because his work was frequently based on the revolution, though it was usually concerned with the plight of the Whites. In reality, although Bulgakov would generally not be considered a fellow traveler, the change in policy toward fellow travelers is reflective of the party's policy toward all non-party writers.

⁹ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution, 29 July 1924, in Documents of Soviet History*, ed. Rex A. Wade, Vol. 3, *Lenin's Heirs 1923-1925* (Gulf Breeze: Academic international Press, 1998), 190.

¹⁰Mikhail Bulgakov, diary, 8 January 1924, in J.A.E Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Mikhail Bulgakov, a Life in Letters and Diaries* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 56.

¹¹Mikhail Bulgakov, "Future prospects," *Grozny*, 26 November 1917, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 16.

¹² Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, 1917-1953* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 76.

As Stalin consolidated his power, it seemed a harder line was taken toward the “fellow travelers”. This was a result of the “third revolution” where policies of NEP’s more moderate atmosphere began to fade, political polarization took place and “the political intervention in literature ‘from above’ by Stalin began.”¹³ As a result of this environment, authors were not only persecuted by the government, but also by non-governmental literary critics. This seems to be part of the outgrowth of political denunciations. Following these events, many authors, communist and non-communist, complained of how oppressive the literary environment had become.

Although the writing environment was repressive, it was evident Stalin spent time looking into the arts, both proletarian and non, being created within Russia, rather than just controlling it. At a gathering at Gorky’s house on the 26 of October 1932, according to Kemp-Welch, it “became apparent that he (Stalin) knew the works of many writers better than other participants in the conversation.” Stalin was known to be well read in Soviet authors’ works and this allowed him to pass judgment on authors. One example of this is a note Stalin personally wrote following a reading of A. P. Platnov’s “To Advantage.” According to the translator, Stalin took notes on the article that articulated his unhappiness with it and stated, “The author and the bunglers should both be punished”.¹⁴ The importance of this is to show Stalin actually took his personal time reading journals, in this case *Red Virgin Soil*, in order to keep apprised of the literary sphere, and when he did not like what he saw, he intervened.

Stalin tried to use literature as a tool to advance his brand of Communism by providing exemplars of communist individuals through the ideology of Socialist Realism. This would display role models of Soviet citizens to inspire others in the Bolshevik ideology. Yet, at times,

¹³Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 45.

¹⁴ Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 121.

Stalin chose not to wholeheartedly suppress those writers who were not directly party aligned. It seems Stalin, at times, felt he had to preserve what he perceived as literary quality no matter the writers' allegiance. Stalin seemed to care about literary quality and often voiced his displeasure with the lack of it within the exclusively proletarian organizations.

Gorky

Gorky was an essential figure in Soviet literature and, although he did not intercede in Bulgakov's life as much as he did for others, Bulgakov felt the effects and influences of Gorky's other interventions. Gorky was essentially an institution in Stalinist Russia, or at least was made to look that way. It is surprising Stalin put up with him based on some of Stalin's personal views of Gorky that he espoused at least before 1927. During the early news paper debates between Gorky and the Bolsheviks Stalin apparently called Gorky a "renegade"¹⁵.

Even prior to Stalin's rise to power, leading Bolsheviks had problems with his works. On July 31 1920, Politburo did not like a number of essays Gorky had published and declared, "there is nothing Communist about these essays, but there is a great deal that is anti-Communist."¹⁶

Amid this criticism, Gorky left the Soviet Union for a time and was highly regarded internationally. Despite this incident and others, however, Gorky had already had a high position within the Soviet Union. "During 'War Communism (1918-1920) Gorky became 'unofficial minister of culture.'"¹⁷ During this time he set up many institutions in order to help fellow writers and may have even saved some from starvation. Despite his previous transgression against the party, because of Gorky's notoriety, "in 1927, however, Stalin needed Gorky, and felt

¹⁵ Lidiia Spiridonova. "Gorky and Stalin (According to New Materials from A.M. Gorky's Archive)." *The Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1995): 414.

¹⁶ Politburo, resolution on the essays of A.M Gorky ,31 July 1920, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 77

¹⁷ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 19.

the need to bring him from Sorrento to Russia and make him his ally.”¹⁸ Despite Stalin’s presence, according to Spiridonova, Gorky “was almost the only one who dared protest the politicization of literature and the creation of the ‘cult of personality’” during the 1930’s.¹⁹ Yet Stalin kept Gorky around for the purpose of his political influence. Though Gorky was socialist, he ran counter in many ways to Stalin. He supported the intelligentsia, was against the politicization of literature and was not a “party man.”²⁰ Stalin put up with Gorky to fulfill a goal. This goal being that Gorky served as an authoritative figurehead to implement new guidelines of Soviet literature, mainly socialist realism. Stalin dealt with a trade off; he put up with someone who did not entirely agree with his politics in order to gain prominence in the literary field.

Gorky’s interventions, especially in, Bulgakov’s friend, Zamyatin’s life, may have lead Bulgakov to pursue his relationship with Stalin as he did, and Gorky’s influence likely moderated Stalin’s response to Bulgakov. This is because all the interventions that Gorky undertook to encourage leaders to spare writers were known and may have given Bulgakov hope; Gorky defended literary intelligentsia from Bolshevik persecution and was likely a major influence and driving force in Stalin’s care about literature. According to Zamyatin, “the amelioration of many of the “excesses” in the Soviet government’s policies and the gradual relaxation of a regime of dictatorship were the result of these friendly discussions”²¹ . This is interesting given that there was a tension between Gorky and Stalin.

The greatest effect Gorky had on Bulgakov was his intervention in the life of Bulgakov’s friend Zamyatin. Bulgakov had tried multiple times to leave the USSR and had been denied. His friend Zamyatin was allowed to leave largely due to Gorky’s intervention. According to Proffer,

¹⁸ Lidia Spiridonova. “*Gorky and Stalin (According to New Materials from A.M. Gorky’s Archive.)*” *The Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1995): 415.

¹⁹Ibid., 413.

²⁰Ibid 413

²¹Ibid., 417.

Gorky, after conversations with Stalin, was able to get permission for Zamyatin to leave²². Apparently; Zamyatin's successful attempt to leave spurred Bulgakov to leave²³.

Zamyatin too had addressed a letter to Stalin asking to be allowed to leave the USSR; and thanks to the intercession of Gorky, he actually did obtain permission to leave” in 1931²⁴. This may have inspired Bulgakov’s later request to leave the USSR.

Stalin and the literary struggles for balance

This Struggle for quality that Gorky supported and that Stalin seemed to support as well resulted in a kind of balancing act between ideology and “quality” for Stalin. This balancing act helps explain why Stalin’s assistance, at times, was so inconsistent, because, in many ways, Bulgakov was part of balancing party orthodoxy with quality. This balancing act on the larger scale of Soviet literature was mostly a struggle between Proletarian allied organizations and the old intelligentsia or Fellow travelers. The primary proletarian group in literature was RAPP and it, along with other proletarian allied groups in the arts, strove for alliance with party dogma, often at a huge cost to quality. A least according to Gorky, and his allies, mostly non-party writers, who after the fall of RAPP and during the establishment of the Writer’s Union in 1934 tried to encourage quality writing after RAPP’s dissolution and the eventual establishment of the repressive writers union .²⁵ While it existed though RAPP opposed, the “fellow travelers,” mostly consisting of the old intelligentsia class who typically were not directly allied with the Bolsheviks but produced work of some merit. The Soviet government seemed to try to strike a balance between these groups early on, but as Stalinist policies were enacted, the government moved more and more for party control over literature with early indicators, such as the 1928

²² Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 313.

²³ Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 116-117

²⁴ Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 116

²⁵ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 168.

resolution on literature. It is likely that the party did not perceive this as a balance, but the need for control trumped quality, though it did seem the high leadership of the party was concerned with the lack thereof. As control, increased, Stalin's need for quality in literature was sacrificed. The struggle between quality and control seemed to manifest itself in Stalin's literary policy. In a form that, at times, made his actions seem contradictory. Despite his want for quality, his ultimate goal was control.

An example of this struggle is Party relations with RAPP. As time went on, especially as Stalin gained power, groups like RAPP gained supremacy. By 1929 this seemed evident, as indicated by Fleishman who found on "December 4 an article appeared in *Pravda* that officially declared for the first time that RAPP was *the* vehicle of party literature."²⁶ Stalin used RAPP as a tool, against his political enemies. "After Stalin's speech the rightist danger in the Party" RAPP started attacking "rightists" including Bulgakov who was outside the party²⁷. Stalin's intention, whether he wanted this expansion of RAPP attacking anyone who was perceived as rightist outside the party, is unclear. Despite Fellow Travelers trying to defend themselves, RAPP still managed to suppress them along with the rightists in the party.

Yet this group soon met its own demise because it took too much power out of the hands of Stalin. While it existed, it harassed many great artists and writers such as Pilnyak, Zamyatin, Bulgakov, and forced them into obscurity. As a result of RAPP's existence, the overall quality of literature, at least from the perspective of westerners and most fellow travels, declined. Part of the reason why Rapp met its end was because at times it was more trouble than it was worth for

²⁶Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak: The Poet and His Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 153.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 151.

Stalin. Yet RAPP was “considered useful to the party in these years (1928-1932) chiefly as the scourge of certain opposition groups in politics and literature”²⁸.

While RAPP and groups like it existed, they often complained about authors like Bulgakov. One proletarian group that complained about Bulgakov directly to Stalin was The Proletarian Theater Association in December 1928. They complained that the party was not regulating the theater enough. They attacked Bulgakov personally, complaining about “Bulgakov, who has gotten four blatantly anti-Soviet plays staged in the three premier theaters of Moscow; moreover, plays that are by no means outstanding for their artistic qualities but that are, at best, on an average level?”²⁹ This letter to Stalin makes it apparent that Bulgakov’s works were not well received by communist critics and that proletarian groups wanted to get rid of him.

Less than 3 months later Stalin wrote a letter to Bill Belotserkovsky ,a critic of Bulgakov, who was a member of the Proletarian Theater association, ,that seemed to both defend and attack one of his works entitled “Flight”. This play depicted the cruelty of war and was historically based in the actions of the White army General Wrangel between October 1920 to autumn 1921 and the eventual retreat of his army from Russia.³⁰ The play consisted of eight dreams that depicted the events that occurred during this period, ranging from southern Russia to Constantinople³¹ . This letter helps shed light on Stalin’s views of Bulgakov’s works. Stalin stated, “*Flight* in its present form is an anti-soviet phenomenon. However, he added that “he would have nothing against the staging of *Flight* if Bulgakov were to add his eight dreams.....” that basically would add the Bolshevik political perspective to the play³² . According to Stalin

²⁸Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 95, quoted in Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 107.

²⁹ Proletarian Theater Association to I. V. Stalin, Moscow, December 1928, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 54.

³⁰ Nadine Natov, *Mikhail Bulgakov* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 61.

³¹ Ibid 62

³² I.V. Stalin to V.N. Bill-Belotserkovsky, Moscow, 1 February 1929, in I.V. Stalin, *Sobrainie socineny* (Collected works), vol 11 (Moscow 1949), 326-329, quoted in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 56.

these dreams would help show the viewer that the “honest” characters were “chucked out of Russia not due to Bolsheviks’ caprice, but because they were living off the people”.³³ This would indicate that although *Flight* was yet another play that favorably portrays the Whites, it would be acceptable if certain pro government sections were added, despite the fact that the main portion of the play depicts the Whites fleeing from persecution. Yet, the true intentions behind this letter was questionable because Stalin may have had ulterior motives. *Flight* ignited a large debate within the party apparatus. The letter continued in many ways defending Bulgakov. Stalin speaks to why Bulgakov is necessary in this letter. “Why are Bulgakov's plays produced so often? Probably because we don’t have enough of our own plays good enough for staging”³⁴. Stalin seems to want to get rid of non-party authors but is stopped by the fact that party writers did not produce works of much merit and many non-party authors did. This letter indicates that at the time of its writing Stalin believed Bulgakov was necessary, in a censored format, to preserve good culture, despite the fact that his works were not necessarily politically correct. This is surprising when in Stalinist Russia many were banned for minor variations from the party.

Stalin’s words to Belotserkovsky about *Flight* both condemning and partially endorsing it are interesting. In January 1929 prior to Stalin’s letter Kerzhentsev, Deputy Head of Agitprop to wrote a critique of *Flight* and submitted it to the Politburo.³⁵ He states that Bulgakov tries to “vindicate and ennoble those White leaders who he condemned in *Days of the Turbins*”³⁶. This is an interesting idea in itself because many felt the *Turbins* made many feel sympathetic to the Whites, which will be noted later. Kerzhentsev took great issue with *Flight* regarding its political “distortions.” He states the play, “distorts class essence of white guard movement”, it tries to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 57.

³⁵ P. M. Kerzhentsev to Politburo, Report on M.A. Bulgakov’s *Flight*, No later than January 1929, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 98

³⁶ Ibid.

rehabilitate leaders in White movement, and depicts the “Reds as wild animals” He concludes that flight must be banned and states “Glavrepertkom has come out unanimously against the play”³⁷. Despite Stalin’s assertion that *Flight* could be put on after revision it was never performed in front of a live audience.

The question then becomes why Stalin even seemed to consider this play for Staging. Some in the Politburo supported the play, as did Svidersky and Gorky,³⁸ but it was very clear, as Stalin stated, that it was an anti-Soviet play. Perhaps supporting the play would help play the Leftist RAPP against this theoretical Rightist threat. Yet it seems likely that Stalin would have never allowed the play and perhaps he was just trying to use the threat of allowance to manipulate Belotserkovsky into doing what Stalin wanted him to do, or simply make him not at ease. Clark indicates that Stalin’s response to him was Stalin using the letter of the proletarian theater association to his “own purposes”³⁹. Either way, *Flight* and Bulgakov were part of the struggle for literary balance.

Eventually a Party Decree abolishing all literary and artist organizations disbanded Rapp in April 1932⁴⁰. Because of the abolition of RAPP and formation of the Writer Union, the central party apparatus gained greater control over literature despite the fact propaganda indicated more freedom was given to writers. (This is because “the system of ‘command-management’” began being installed which granted more direct government control in literature.)⁴¹

Despite the constant tightening of party control over literature, there were rare instances where Stalin made special exceptions and loosened restraints. In a speech soon after the

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁸ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 53

³⁹ Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 55

⁴⁰ TSK VPK(B) Decree on Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations, 23 April 1932, in *Documents of Soviet History*, ed. Alex G. Cummings, Vol. 6, *Restoration of Order 1932-1934* (Gulf Breeze: Academic international Press, 2004), 8.

⁴¹ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 115.

consolidation of writer organizations Stalin made an interesting remark where he seemed to indicate the need for a balance between party control and quality, or in this case diversity. "Why did we liquidate RAPP? Because RAPP was cut off from nonparty writers, because it ceased serious party work in literature."⁴² The duality in this statement seems surprising because these are two diametrically opposed statements. It could be said that this appearance of trying to find balance between party and nonparty was just a show in order to eliminate RAPP and gain more control. Despite this motivation it seemed that Stalin's concerns over quality were to some degree genuine because the nature of Stalin's relationship with Bulgakov seemed to indicate that Stalin had some genuine need to win over at least one non-Party writer to protect quality. The unification of writers groups in the end was the party's way of securing more control. During a phone call during June 1934 between Pasternak and Stalin, Pasternak stated, "since 1927 the writers' organizations (since the defeat of the interparty opposition) had been afraid of making appeals for their own arrested members."⁴³ This would make it seem that even before unification things were bad but by the time of the call only the unified writers union existed and they feared helping their own members according to Pasternak.

Yet, despite the oppression, Stalin still seemed to be attempting to find a balance in literature. That is one reason why Stalin preserved Bulgakov, but this alone cannot explain the relationship, because Bulgakov was clearly against the Soviet system. It does seem unlikely that the leaders of the Soviet Union perceived quality vs. control as a balance. It is likely that they perceived more true Bolshevik control would lead to more quality. In reality though literary "balance" was needed in order to maintain some amount of quality, they did have to give up absolute control and keep oppositionists around. It is one thing to be a true fellow traveler and be

⁴² Stalin's First Authoritative Statement of Policy on Literature, 26 October 1932, in Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 129.

⁴³ Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak: The Poet and His Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 181

supported because their ideas are somewhat aligned with the Communist government and perhaps someday they could realistically be cultivated. With Bulgakov, however, this explanation does not seem that logical, though it was employed. Bulgakov's position in the literary debate was only one of the reasons Stalin had for preserving him, the personal relationship between Bulgakov and the dictator also played a role in the preservation of the writer.

Stalin's Personal Interest in Bulgakov

Stalin seemed to have great respect for the quality of the work Bulgakov produced and likely part of his special interest in Bulgakov came from Stalin's view that theater was particularly valuable. When addressing what writers should write and focus their attention on, Stalin stated on the 26 of October 1932 that...

Poetry is fine. Novels are even better. But plays are now best of all. Plays are easy to understand. Our workers are busy. They spend eight hours in the factory. Where can they sit to read a long novel? Comrades, how many volumes are there in your novels? Three volumes. When is the worker going to read them? ⁴⁴

It is well known that Stalin in particular enjoyed *The Days of the Turbins*. "Stalin paid particular attention to Bulgakov, considering him perhaps the most gifted and important dramatist in the USSR. Stalin saw "*Days of the Turbins* no less than 15 times"⁴⁵. This is moderately surprising because many literary critics regarded the play as anti-Soviet, at least at large because it depicted actions of a family, many members of which were in the military, in a sympathetic light.⁴⁶ According to Haber the *Turbins* was an immense hit with the public, but was virulently attacked by practically all the critics for its sympathetic portrait of the Whites. One

⁴⁴Stalin's First Authoritative Statement of Policy on Literature, 26 October 1932, in Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 129-130.

⁴⁵Vitaly Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime* (New York: Martin Kessler Books, Free Press, 1996), 88.

⁴⁶ Nadine Natov, *Mikhail Bulgakov* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 55-57.

even coined the odd word "Bulgakovism"⁴⁷. It seems this term was meant to address Bulgakov's usual habit of producing works that favorably portrayed those who opposed the Bolsheviks. Yet Stalin viewed the play a bit differently than many of the critics; he felt the "positive ideological impact" at times is more important than the intent of the author⁴⁸. The reason the play was preserved was because Stalin felt that "*Days of the Turbins* is the demonstration of the crushing force of Bolshevism"⁴⁹. This was because the White sympathizers in the play seemed helpless against the relentless push of the Bolsheviks during the civil war. According to Curtis "Stalin's enjoyment of *The Days of the Turbins* may have also been a significant factor in Bulgakov's being saved from arrest in periods such as 1929-1930"⁵⁰. Yet despite Stalin's appreciation of the quality of Bulgakov's work, there was still a need for control. *The Days of the Turbins* was restricted to the Moscow Arts Theater⁵¹. This restriction likely helped control the number of people who saw the play and what people saw the play. It seems odd that a person is both supported and repressed simultaneously by the Soviet government and this duality is likely due to Stalin wishing to keep Bulgakov around for cultivation for party tasks, because, although he was clearly unsympathetic to Bolsheviks, he was an excellent playwright and *Days of the Turbins* served a decent political purpose. It was the longest running of all of Bulgakov's works and sustained the most performances.

Days of the Turbins received more than just Stalin's passing support. There was a party struggle banning the play and then a push to have the play reinstated. This was the result of whether the anti Soviet portions of the play, i.e. sympathy to the Whites, were outweighed by

⁴⁷ Edythe C Haber, "Mikhail Bulgakov: A Wolf's Life," *Russian Life* 44, no 4 (July/August 2001): 32-39.

⁴⁸ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 260.

⁴⁹ I.V. Stalin to V.N. Bill-Belotserkovsky, Moscow, 1 February 1929, in I.V. Stalin, *Sobrainie socineny* (Collected works), vol 11 (Moscow 1949), 326-329, quoted in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 57.

⁵⁰ Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 70

⁵¹ Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 67

demonstrating the crushing force of Bolshevism. On September 27 1926, Lunachacharsky sent a letter to Rykov regarding the GPU prohibition of M.A. Bulgakov's *Days of the Turbins*.

At a meeting of the Narkompros board, with the participation of Reperkom, and including the GPU, It was decided to permit Bulgakov's play just for the Art Theatre and just for this season"... "On Saturday evening the GPU informed Narkompros that it was banning the play"... "Rescission of the Narkompros decision by the GPU is highly undesirable and even scandalous"⁵²

Lunachacharsky upset by this incident and sent a letter to Stalin later years later more clearly expressing why he would be irritated because yet again a similar event unfolded. It was upsetting because "various irresponsible journalists and demagogic young people are trying to pin the blame on Narkomp[ros] for permissiveness with regard to *Days of the Turbins*" then Agitprop echoed their displeasure⁵³. This incident understandably shook Lunachacharsky, whose government body was now under attack for following the rules.

"Three days later, on 30 September" the Politburo supported the Narkompros decision⁵⁴. The choice by the GPU to break consensus is interesting and seems like an internal power struggle despite knowledge that Stalin personally endorsed the play. This situation may demonstrate to a certain degree that Stalin had not yet completely consolidated his power. Then, as the deadline again approached in March 1927, Stanislavsky at the Moscow arts theater again petitioned Rykov to reestablish the *Turbins*. The reason being the theater was under strain as a result of 10 anniversary preparations marking the revolution.⁵⁵ A number of months later Smirnov, an Orgburo member and commissar of Agriculture, wrote to the Politburo concerning lifting the ban on *Days of the Turbins* on 8 Oct. 1927. He supported the play, stating the "First of

⁵²A.V. Lunachacharsky to A. I. Rykov, telegram, 27 September 1926, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 91.

⁵³ A.V. Lunachacharsky I. V Stalin, 12 February 1929, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 93.

⁵⁴Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 91.

⁵⁵Stanislavsky to Rykov, March 1927, in Vsevolod Ivanovich Sakharov , Михаил Булгаков : писатель и власть : по секретным архивам ЦК КПСС и КГБ, (Moscow : Olma-Press, 2000), 421. Translated from the Russian by Aleksandr Rygalov for the purposes of this paper.

all this play will allow us to give the younger actors roles to practice" and "Talk of any kind of counter-revolution is completely untrue" in association with the play⁵⁶. This letter was promptly acted upon and on October 10 1927, the Politburo issued a statement, "Right away stop the restrictions on the plays *Days of the Turbins* in the Arts Theater and allow the play *Don Quixote* in the big theater".⁵⁷ This short proclamation not only reinstated Bulgakov's *Days of the Turbins* but also allowed *Don Quixote*, which Bulgakov had translated into Russian in order to run. Yet, three years later, the play was again disrupted when there was disagreement on whether the play should be permitted. Narkompros was going to ban the play but Stalin personally called and told them not to but no one apparently told the other censorship organs about this which caused problems. This resulted in a letter to Stalin from A.V. Lunacharsky to Stalin on 12 Feb 1929 that informed Stalin of the situation of disagreement among the censorship organs.⁵⁸ It was articulated that errors in communication surrounding the ban in lower organs needed to be fixed.

This power struggle may demonstrate many things. It reinforces the idea that Stalin granted special protection for the play. It also demonstrates another situation where Stalin may have been playing one side against the other. In addition to this, the final letter from Lunacharsky seemed to indicate Stalin was trying to make different government organs fight against each other or perhaps it may just be a situation of bad communication.

Despite Stalin's support of *Days of the Turbins*, it would seem that Bulgakov probably exhausted his political capital gained by his work as time went on. Despite Stalin's semi-supportive letter, *Flight* never was shown. This was likely the cause of Bulgakov refusing to edit his work further and just the general resistance of the censorship authorities.

⁵⁶A.P. Smirnov to the Politburo, concerning the lifting of the ban on *Days of the Turbins*, 8 October 1927, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 92.

⁵⁷From the Politburo review about plays, 10 October 1927, in Sakharov, Михаил Булгаков : писатель и, 422.

⁵⁸A.V. Lunacharsky to I.V. Stalin, 12 February 1929, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 93

It is evident that Proletarian authors disliked him and that most critics disliked him. Bulgakov notes this well in his Letter to the USSR, in which he says, “there had been 301 references to me in the Soviet press” “of these, three were complimentary, and 298 were hostile and abusive”.⁵⁹ Even after Stalin seemed to no longer to actively support Bulgakov, according to Proffer, "Yezhov himself would have gladly dispatched Bulgakov to the camps, had he not been afraid that Stalin might suddenly enquire about his whereabouts"⁶⁰. Bulgakov was disliked by those aligned from the party because unrepentant conservative, who never acknowledge socialism as the better system.

Bulgakov WAS NOT A RED sympathizer

At this moment when our unfortunate motherland finds itself at the very bottom of the pit of shame and calamity into which it has been cast by the 'Great Social Revolution', one and the same thought keeps occurring more and more frequently to many of us.”...”And it is a simple one: ‘And what is going to happen to us now?’⁶¹

It is acknowledged by most modern scholars that Bulgakov was critically anticommunist. He himself acknowledged that ‘he will always be a conservative’ in his first published work featured above. His viewpoint seems quite clear in his diaries as well “I am a conservative...’to the core”⁶². Even writers of talent were dispatched for even mildly anti communist works. This makes Stalin’s support of him a bit confusing because it took him years to do anything purposefully pro communist, in the form of writing the play Batum.

His conservatism did not wane either. As late as August 1934 according to his wife’s diaries there were still people asking the question “why had M.A. not been able to accept

⁵⁹ M.A. Bulgakov to the Soviet Government, 28 March 1930, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 104.

⁶⁰Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 418-419.

⁶¹Bulgakov, “Future prospects,” *Grozny*, 26 November 1917, in Curtis’ *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 16.

⁶²M. A. Bulgakov, Diary, 30 September 1923 in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 52

Bolshevism...”⁶³ This shows that Bulgakov seemed to remain openly anti- Bolshevik consistently. How open Bulgakov was about his view is up for debate but it seems he did not attempt to keep them a secret.

In Proffer’s dated biography of Bulgakov, she seems to imply that Bulgakov did not make it terribly obvious to the government that he was anti-soviet in his letter to the USSR. Yet, even in the documents she cites supporting her view, his anti-Soviet view seems clear. In Bulgakov’s Letter to the USSR, dated March 28 1930, he makes clear his work is incompatible with the current government⁶⁴. A message that is seen many times in his correspondence and letters is that of distancing himself from the party. He indicates that it was suggested he write a communist play by a number of fellow traveling writers, but Bulgakov stated he “did not follow that advice”⁶⁵. In his play *Batum*, he finally wrote a communist play about Stalin’s youth where he played a role in workers’ unrest in Batum in 1902-4 but he did not do this until 1939.⁶⁶ For Bulgakov not writing a communist play seems like a point of defiance and a way of remaining true to himself. For a casual reader at the time, his refusal to write something pro communist in order to make his life easier would seem to indicate he wanted to maintain his integrity by distancing himself from the government he objected to. He continues the theme of the incompatibility of his works with the USSR when he says that many critics have "demonstrated that the works of Mikhail Bulgakov cannot exist in the USSR" “And I declare that the soviet press is ABSOLUTELY CORRECT”⁶⁷. This statement distanced his art from the political orientation of the country and is significant. Later in the letter, he asks that he be allowed to

⁶³ Yelena Sergeyevna’s, diary, 29 August 1934, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 182.

⁶⁴M.A. Bulgakov to the Soviet Government, 28 March 1930, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 103-110.

⁶⁵Ibid., 103.

⁶⁶ Nadine Natov, *Mikhail Bulgakov (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985)*, 113.

⁶⁷M.A. Bulgakov to the Soviet Government, 28 March 1930, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 105.

leave the USSR or at least be given a job so he could live⁶⁸. Bulgakov contemplated leaving the USSR many times throughout his life and his wish to be an émigré parallels the wish of many “fellow travelers” who were not allied with the party. Therefore, an analysis of some of Bulgakov’s strongest statements relating to his art form in this letter indicates that his work is incompatible with Bolshevik ideology. Why he chose not to leave is largely unknown considering he contemplated it so much, as will be later covered in depth.

Proffer argues this document is not an attack on the Soviet government based on a section where Bulgakov is trying to defend one of his plays that had been censored as a result of being anti soviet. He argues that there is no merit to this because he “asserts that this play (*The Crimson Island*) is not a libel on the revolution, but a lampoon on the Repertory Committee”⁶⁹. It seems that Proffer focused on this part of the letter during her analysis and did not pay attention to the tone of the letter. Her argument is not false that Bulgakov was defending his play. He stated himself it was not an anti communist play. However, the letter never seemed to assert that he himself was not anti communist when in fact the contrary was true. It is also possible that Proffer had a less reliable version of the letter to the USSR to interpret at the time of her works publication.

There are a number of other instances where it seems government officials were explicitly aware that Bulgakov was anti communist. It is possible to assume that the GPU or OGPU knew of his early newspaper article but there are more instances than this alone. His novella *Heart of a Dog* manuscript and his diary were confiscated by the OGPU. In fact, this confiscation led to the preservation of his diary that he later burned. *The Heart of a Dog* manuscript, if anything like the story that exists today, was at the very least politically

⁶⁸ Ibid., 109-110.

⁶⁹ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 294.

suspicious, if not outright slander against the government. Granted this work was written during NEP and his deviance was tolerated, but it was still on record.

In this story, the main character, a doctor, whose patients are high party officials gets many privileges that a normal proletarian worker in Moscow would not have. He circumvents local party officials with phone calls to his patients and the work seems to paint the officials in a negative light through satire. He transforms a perfectly good dog into a monster that oddly enough chooses to join the party. It then works as a communist and commits many vial acts while in this form until the doctor finds that he must unmake this evil creature. This work was blatantly anti revolutionary, painting a bourgeoisie doctor as a man in the right struggling to maintain what he once had. It is surprising that this work did not make Bulgakov a clear class enemy in later years. Works like these makes Stalin's support of Bulgakov even more surprising.

Bulgakov did finally agree to write *Batum*, a play about Stalin's early participation as a revolutionary in 1898-1904, in 1936 and actually wrote it in 1939, but he likely did so under duress or simply hoped that it would improve his situation.⁷⁰ It is unlikely he did this because his political views had changed. Also at the same time, he was writing *Batum* he was in the middle of writing *Master and Margarita*. A significant plot line in the work in relation to the real Bulgakov is the plight of Master who is a writer that is suppressed and actually arrested for his work. Also, Bulgakov seems to mock facets of the life in Soviet Union such as the debate of existence of God and government informers. So it seems Bulgakov maintained his beliefs despite writing a communist play. Some scholars look at *Batum* as a defeat for Bulgakov. One example would be Curtis who states that some feel "Bulgakov demeaned himself in a dreadful compromise with the Tyrant and sacrificed his artistic integrity"⁷¹. He then defends Bulgakov by

⁷⁰ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 409.

⁷¹ Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 230.

saying Batum for Bulgakov “must have been (significant in) that at last he had some sort of license to reflect publicly on the tyrant, and perhaps above all to confront the nature of his own relationship with Stalin”⁷². Proffer as well, seems to defend Bulgakov in this regard in her biography. In reality, though, it is neither a defeat nor a victory for Bulgakov; it is a continuation of the Bulgakov Stalin relationship. It seems immaterial whether Bulgakov compromised himself or not. He had already accepted help from Stalin in his past in order to survive and the choice Bulgakov made should be seen more as an act of preservation and not one of victory or defeat. It is not really the place for historians to choose if Bulgakov won or lost integrity. Despite Bulgakov’s choice to produce this play, he is still known as a conservative because he continued his work at the same time he worked on Batum. Also, despite writing this play, the play was canceled because “It was unacceptable to turn a figure such as Stalin into a fictional character. And it was unacceptable to place him in made-up situations and put made up words in his mouth”.⁷³

How much did Bulgakov need help to simply survive

Many of Bulgakov’s appeals to the government and Stalin were motivated by a need for survival. This must be understood in order to understand that Bulgakov’s relationship with Stalin in many ways was necessary. This is best seen in his letters to his family and friends before Stalin’s intervention in 1930.

During the civil war, Bulgakov feared for his life and took measures to distance himself from the medical field; he writes of giving souvenirs to his cousin “in case we don’t meet

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Yelena Sergeyevna’s, diary, 1 September 1936, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 238.

again⁷⁴”. Many of his letters during this time recount the instability of the time and his contemplations of trying to leave Russia as well as addressing his early ventures into writing: “I sometimes read over those stories of mine that have been published (in newspapers! In newspapers!) and I think, ‘where is the collection of stories? Where is my reputation? Where are the wasted years?’”⁷⁵

It is in the aftermath of the revolution, in his new life as an author, he attempted to subsist as a writer. He managed to survive the famine immediately following the civil war in 1921 but he writes of the harsh conditions of Moscow and how "I have no wish to be among the number of those who perish" as he struggles to find a private sector job to get paid in 1921⁷⁶. Despite the end of the famine it seems at times, he still had fear of not being able to survive due to large debts "Literature is a difficult business at present. For me with my opinions, [...] it is difficult to get published and just to live. Given that, my ill-health has come at a bad time as well." ⁷⁷

Bulgakov was not the only writer suffering during these times. The famine effected many intellectuals as demonstrated in works such as “the Cave” by Zamyatin that depicts the harsh conditions immediately following the Russian revolution in Moscow and how merely finding firewood in order to avoid freezing to death was nearly impossible.

By 1926, things were looking up for Bulgakov. Both his plays *Days of the Turbins* and *Zoyka’s Apartment* were playing. At least in the case of *Zoyka’s Apartment* it seems to be the Repertory Committee that grants the permission for the play to get staged but whether they were spurred by outside forces seems unknown.⁷⁸ In a letter to Vikenty Veresayev he comments, “I

⁷⁴ M.A. Bulgakov to his cousin Konstantin, 17 August 1939, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 287.

⁷⁵ M.A. Bulgakov to Konstantin, 1 February 1921, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 19.

⁷⁶ M.A. Bulgakov to his mother, 17 November 1921, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 37.

⁷⁷ M.A. Bulgakov, Diary, 26 October 1923, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 53.

⁷⁸ Vasily Kuza to M .A. Bulgakov, 17 November 1926, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 83.

might be able to pay my debts off this autumn”⁷⁹. In 1928, he began having trouble with copyright issues abroad and requested permission to go abroad, which was denied on the 8 of March 1928⁸⁰. This frustration in his work and the misfortunes of 1929 led to direct requests to the government.

First appeals

Despite Bulgakov’s early success with some of his plays, by 1929 “all of Bulgakov's theatrical works were also banned.”⁸¹ This led to increasingly hard times for Bulgakov due to lack of money. His plays were not being played in the USSR and he was receiving little royalties abroad because of copyright infringement Bulgakov lived a fragile existence. These problems caused Bulgakov to begin making appeals to the government.

In July 1929,⁸² Bulgakov wrote a letter to Stalin, Kalinin, Svidersky and Gorky in which he outlined the problems he was having as a result of all his plays being banned. From having all his publications either banned, disallowed from public reading or disallowed from reprinting, including, Cuff-notes, Diaboliada and The White Guard.⁸³ As well as the terrible reviews he received that grew increasingly worse “until in the end they have simply turned into frenzies of abuse.”⁸⁴ Also the works he requested returned to him by the OGPU were not (Heart of a dog and his diaries) and he was denied permission to go abroad. All these problems led him to the following request.

⁷⁹ M.A. Bulgakov to Vikenty Veresayev, 19 August 1926, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 83

⁸⁰Administrative Department of Moscow City Council to M. A. Bulgakov, 8 March 1928, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 88.

⁸¹Edythe C Haber, “Mikhail Bulgakov: A Wolf's Life,” *Russian Life* 44, no 4 (July/August 2001): 32-39.

⁸² M.A. Bulgakov to Stalin, Kalinin, Svidersky and Gorky, July 1929, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 93.

⁸³ Ibid., 94.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 94.

Since I no longer have the strength to survive, since I am persecuted and know that it is impossible that I shall ever be published or staged within the USSR again, and since I am close to suffering a nervous breakdown, I am turning to you to request you to intercede with the Government of the USSR to ask them to EXPEL ME FROM THE USSR TOGETHER WITH MY WIFE L. Ye. BULGAKOVA, who joins me in this request⁸⁵

It seems that, due to the addresses, Bulgakov did not yet believe his salvation rested in the hands of Stalin alone. This is somewhat logical being that Gorky had facilitated the help of many writers at this point, including his friend Zamyatin. Following this letter to multiple addressees, he wrote two more letters to Gorky asking him too basically to “support my petition”⁸⁶ to leave, the last of which was sent on the 28 of September 1929. Adding to the fact that Bulgakov did not yet feel Stalin was the only important figure is the writing of a letter to Avel Yenkidze Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. In the letter he requested to be allowed to depart stating that he was “I appeal[ing] to the highest body in the Union- The central Executive Committee of the USSR”. It is evident that Bulgakov is trying his best to leave and is going to the sources he feels will most benefit him in his efforts to leave.

Letter to the USSR

It is arguable that the correspondence that most drove Stalin to directly intervene in Bulgakov’s life was his “Letter to the USSR,” which has already been examined to explore Bulgakov’s political views. It should be mentioned that Bulgakov’s appeals even before the letter to the USSR received some attention.

On July 30 1929, Sversky wrote to Smirnov addressing Bulgakov’s situation.⁸⁷ He expressed concern for Bulgakov. "I had an extended talk with Bulgakov he seems like a person

⁸⁵ Ibid 94-95

⁸⁶ M.A. Bulgakov to Gorky, 3 September 1929, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 97.

⁸⁷Sversky to Smirnov, July 30 1929, in Sakharov, Михаил Булгаков : писатель и, 434.

in" a dire situation. "I'm not even convinced that he is mentally healthy. His situation is truly dire."⁸⁸ He expressed the fact that it "seems he (Bulgakov) wants to work with us, but they're not giving him or helping him with that" (A job) and he believes that, under the circumstances, what he is asking for seems reasonable.

Yet what seemed to stir real action was the Letter to the USSR written on March 28 1930. The content of the letter addresses many issues and the fact it is addressed to the government still shows Bulgakov did not consider Stalin his only hope to get what he needed in order to survive. In addition to making his political position clear, in declaring that "the works of Mikhail Bulgakov cannot exist in the USSR,"⁸⁹ he asked for one of two things and it is likely, because of that, Stalin had options to manipulate Bulgakov, so he had a reason to call.

I appeal to the humanity of the Soviet authorities and request they magnanimously allow me, a writer who cannot be of any use at home in his own fatherland, to leave for freedom.⁹⁰

And if on the other hand even what I have written is unconvincing, and I am condemned to lifelong silence in the USSR, then I would request the Soviet government to give me a job for which I am qualified.⁹¹

According to Shentalinsky, Yagoda wrote on the top of Bulgakov's letter, "Give him the opportunity to work where he wants"⁹². Shentalinsky feels Yagoda did not have the authority to give his own advice and he states is "The very style of the resolution is reminiscent of Stalin"⁹³. Based on the power struggles surrounding Bulgakov's works over censorship, I believe Yagoda did take the personal intuitive to give his advice. Although he may have been trying to agree with what he, felt would have been the decision of Stalin, who was now cementing his power.

⁸⁸Ibid

⁸⁹M.A. Bulgakov to the Soviet Government, 28 March 1930, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 105.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting*, 89.

⁹³ Ibid

The Phone call

A month after the Letter to the USSR Stalin called Bulgakov. During this call, Stalin gave Bulgakov a job, and hinted at a meeting that would never happen. The letter to the USSR likely gave an opening to Stalin to give Bulgakov two choices which Stalin may see as an opportunity to manipulate Bulgakov. It is unlikely that Stalin truly wanted Bulgakov to leave but he appeared to give Bulgakov the choice between a job and leaving. Bulgakov acceded to Stalin that "I have thought a great deal recently about the question of whether a Russian writer can live outside his homeland. And it seems to me he can't."⁹⁴ This is surprising given Bulgakov's earlier appeals but this will be addressed later.

The motivations for the call, the results of this phone call and even what exactly was said during this conversation vary based on the account and the scholar interpreting the event. What seems evident no matter the viewpoint is that this call had a great impact on Bulgakov. This call guaranteed a job, ensured him an income and his economic survival during a time which Bulgakov was ostracized. Arguably, this call saved Bulgakov's life for more reasons than just providing him an income. It seemed to give him a special Status. Pasternak "knew that Stalin's call to Bulgakov gave the writer an ambiguous status: a certain independence from the rest of literature combined with a distinct and humiliating sensation of being odd man out."⁹⁵ This call may have been what protected Bulgakov from arrest because party functionaries knew Bulgakov had Stalin's personal protection. Personally, for Bulgakov, it gave him a sense of hope that he had the attention of the leader. As time passed, however, this faded. The promised meeting that never came weighed heavily on Bulgakov: "I suffer from one tormenting unhappiness. And that

⁹⁴Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 111.

⁹⁵ Marietta Chudakova, "Pasternak and Bulgakov: The Boundary between Two Literary Cycles," Trans. Marian Schwartz, *Russian Social Science Review* 37, no. 3 (May-June 1996), 77-96.

is that my conversation with the General Secretary (Stalin) never took place.”⁹⁶ In later years, Bulgakov’s wife hoped Stalin would contact Bulgakov when he was very ill before he died, because she hoped it would give him new life.

Many scholars feel that Mayakovski’s suicide was the immediate cause of the call, since it occurred just 4 days after his suicide. This argument seems like a credible one because Stalin was fearful of perhaps losing another great artist, especially one he personally liked. I believe Mayakovski’s act is only the catalyst for the call that preserved Bulgakov for another 10 years. The “Letter to the USSR” gave Stalin an opening to manipulate Bulgakov to his will. Stalin knew what exactly Bulgakov wanted and that was to leave, but Bulgakov gave an additional option: to stay and take a job. It is worth asking if despite Stalin making an offer to leave, he was really able to manipulate Bulgakov in making a decision to stay.

Yet, the fact that Bulgakov was valued at the time would encourage this call even more beyond Stalin’s personal interest in Bulgakov. If Bulgakov was suicidal, which seems possible given Sversky’s account, Stalin was at risk of losing a political asset. RAPP was still in existence and Bulgakov served as a kind of foil and counter weight to their overly leftist tendencies as well as being a beacon of quality. If Bulgakov were allowed to starve or kill himself, then there would be one less foil to RAPP. In addition, Bulgakov gave RAPP a target to attack, which may have redirected attacks that could have fallen on other literary figure. The fact that the literary debate had ended by 1940 suggests why Stalin did not again directly assist Bulgakov near the time of his death. Then again, he was commissioned to make a play about Stalin so the situation was likely a bit more complex.

⁹⁶ M.A. Bulgakov to Vikenty Veresayev, 22-28 July 1931, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 129.

Proffer suggests that Stalin's protection of Bulgakov occurred because of "opponent syndrome, wherein one has more respect for one's opponent than one's converts"⁹⁷. This explanation seems a bit vague. Stalin in a few instances seems to want to sway Bulgakov. The idea of swaying people to the parties' side is something the Bolshevik party did often and in Bulgakov's case, this is reflected in the earlier fact that many encouraged him to write a communist play. Stalin seemed to share the idea of co-opting people into the Communist fold. During a speech on the 26th of October 1923, Stalin stated, "discarding people is easy, but winning them to one's side is difficult"⁹⁸. It seems that Stalin won this victory at some level when Bulgakov chose to work on *Batum*. After the work was not allowed to be put on stage Bulgakov was broken and perhaps Stalin felt Bulgakov was no longer of any worth. It is interesting to note that once Bulgakov appeared to have done what Stalin may have wanted, he received no further help from him.

This would support Proffer's assertion that "It seems very likely to me that he had more respect....." for those who opposed him."⁹⁹ If this assertion were true, there would have been no such thing as widespread political purges or the nature of the literary environment. Yet the intervention that Stalin took at the time was a unique grouping of events that persevered Bulgakov for the short run. Stalin liked his works, he was politically useful, and perhaps Bulgakov could have been a useful literary ally if he turned to the communist fold, but he did not. All these events led to his odd semi conditional support that seemed to have ended soon after the phone call.

⁹⁷ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 418-19.

⁹⁸ Stalin's First Authoritative Statement of Policy on Literature, 26 October 1932, in Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 128.

⁹⁹ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 418-419.

Bulgakov's fears Despite Stalin's intervention

As evidence of Stalin's fading support or merely fake support, even under Stalin's protection Bulgakov still had much to fear. Despite Stalin giving him a job, Bulgakov was still greatly in debt, which either indicates Bulgakov was a terrible spender or the Soviet system failed him. Just a few months after Bulgakov received employment on August 7 1930 Bulgakov wrote his brother Nikolay complaining about how all his money is going to pay off debts or taxes and he is "left with just a few rubles a month."¹⁰⁰

A few years after the call, the literary critics still brutally attacked Bulgakov, supporting the argument that Stalin liked to have Bulgakov around and a distraction against radical literary critics. In a way, perhaps Bulgakov filled the role as a visible enemy. His wife writes in her diary how M.A abandoned work on the translation on the Merry Wives because of Gorchakov's harassment of his insistence that scenes be added to the play; despite promises of protection by the theater, Bulgakov apparently stated, "That's all a pack of lies. The Theatre's not capable of protecting me from anything."¹⁰¹ This alone is interesting because Bulgakov is harassed by critics for just translating things and this is often of non-communist writers survived at the time. This situation shows how even after Stalin helped him he still was a huge target for harassment.

He still suffered from endless troubles trying to get published, even after Stalin's call. He writes to a fellow writer, Vikenty Veresayev about *Moliere* being canceled in March 1932¹⁰². The continuing long-term problems he suffered are indicated in another later letter. In a letter on March 24 1937 to Pavel Popov, who was a long time friend of his, Bulgakov feels that 1937 is going to be a bad year and that he takes much offense to people saying to him "Never mind, it

¹⁰⁰ M.A. Bulgakov to his brother Nikolay, 7 August 1930, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*,

¹⁰¹ Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 1 September 1936, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 238.

¹⁰² M.A. Bulgakov to Vikenty Veresayev, 15 March 1932, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 138.

will all get printed after your death!"¹⁰³ In addition to not being published, the Central Committee called Misha in April 1937 and basically told him how he should write.¹⁰⁴ This direct call in by the government seemed to be one indication that Stalin's protection was gone, or at least fading, although he got corrected by the central committee and not arrested, Bulgakov knew the rules. It seems likely the committee felt like rebuking him, and in order to go before the Central Committee, Stalin must have known. In addition to all these problems, in 1938 Bulgakov apparently "reached his quota of paper."¹⁰⁵ This situation in 1938 illustrates again, how as time went on it seems things only got worse for Bulgakov. To deny a writer the paper to write on seems like nothing short of a literary death sentence and shows Stalin's protect for Bulgakov to be fleeting.

In addition to these fears, Bulgakov still had great political fears likely because Stalin's protection did not make him immune from the need for political compliance. This was especially true during the purges, including the great terror (1936-1939). One issue Bulgakov had to tend to was the fact that in the French production of one of his plays, *Zoyka's Apartment*, the French translator had substituted names of the characters for leaders of the USSR. On the 31 July 1934, he wrote to Maria Reinhardt asking for their immediate removal¹⁰⁶. According to his wife's diary "M.A's hair stood on end"¹⁰⁷ as a result of the French translation. This is not surprising given that a negative portrait of Stalin or Lenin at this time likely would have cost Bulgakov his life.

¹⁰³M.A. Bulgakov to Pavel Popov, 24 March 1937, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 248

¹⁰⁴ Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 7 April 1937, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 250

¹⁰⁵ Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 1 November 1938, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 282.

¹⁰⁶M.A. Bulgakov to Maria Reinhardt, 31 July 1934, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 180.

¹⁰⁷Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 15 August 1934, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 181.

Bulgakov's fears and stress seemed to manifest itself in illness that eventually resulted in his death. The signs of this were evident throughout his life but seemed to be affecting his work by 1935 because Bulgakov asked for two weeks of as a result of neuralgia.¹⁰⁸

Bulgakov's refusal to leave

With all of these continuing terrible events for Bulgakov after the phone call, his decision to tell Stalin that he chose to stay is a surprising one, one he regretted. Chudakova makes the same point: "In a telephone conversation with Stalin on 18 March 1930, he--spontaneously, in our view--rejects this idea, informing Stalin of this (letters to P. S. Popov from the first half of 1932 show his mounting despair, beginning in late 1930, as he realizes his irreparable mistake)."¹⁰⁹ The question of why he made this spontaneous decision is perplexing given his history of asking to leave. Especially when some accounts say that after Bulgakov said he did not want to leave, Stalin essentially asked whether he was sure; by suggested in the phone call, "maybe you really do need to travel abroad"¹¹⁰.

Bulgakov's response to Stalin on the phone shows him to identify with Russian but not Soviet nationalism, which is noteworthy, given that a few years later Stalin himself seemed to greatly promote pre revolutionary Russian nationalism that was mixed with Soviet ideology. The best conclusion that likely can be reached is that Bulgakov gave Stalin the answer he thought Stalin wanted at the time in order preserve himself. Perhaps Bulgakov hoped as indicated by his want to meet with Stalin that perhaps his situation would change with direct contact by talking directly to Stalin. One of the best explanations of this occurrence is likely the

¹⁰⁸ Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 26 April 1935, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 199.

¹⁰⁹ Marietta Chudakova, "Pasternak and Bulgakov: The Boundary between Two Literary Cycles," Trans. Marian Schwartz, *Russian Social Science Review* 37, no. 3 (May-June 1996), 77-96.

¹¹⁰ M.A. Bulgakov to I.V. Stalin, 30 May 1931, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 108.

“Father Stalin Figure” which has been explored by other Russian history scholars. This in many ways may explain Bulgakov’s personal view of Stalin.

In some ways, though Chudakova seems to counteract his argument because her interpretation of the conversation makes it seem that Stalin was able to strong-arm the conversation to his will. “But if for Stalin the conversation with Bulgakov ‘worked’ (Stalin steered the conversation strictly along the planned channel, and Bulgakov submitted to this direction; all his later letters were fruitless attempts to correct the course with hindsight).”¹¹¹

The father Stalin ideology in some ways grew out of the father Czar figure that the high leader did not know of the offenses of the lower government functionaries. Both belief systems generally articulated that the high leader was right and just and that lower functionaries abused their power and if the higher ruler knew, they would correct the transgressions. To a certain degree, this mentality is evident in Bulgakov’s wife. In her diary of March 14 1936, she writes, “I kept thinking about Stalin and dreaming that he would think of Misha (Bulgakov), and our fate would be transformed.”¹¹² It seems that Bulgakov’s wife believed that if Stalin would think about Bulgakov he would do something good for him, but it seems obvious to a modern day observer that Stalin was aware of Bulgakov’s plight. Given that this diary was written about Stalin’s attendance of one of Bulgakov’s plays.

In a letter to Stalin, Bulgakov himself seems to show he may suffer the father Stalin complex. He wrote to Stalin “that [his] dream as a writer would be to be summoned to see you in person”¹¹³. This, while not as explicitly stated as Bulgakov’s wife, seems to indicate that meeting and talking to Stalin would be a transformative experience, probably indicating Bulgakov

¹¹¹ Marietta Chudakova, “Pasternak and Bulgakov: The Boundary between Two Literary Cycles,” Trans. Marian Schwartz, *Russian Social Science Review* 37, no. 3 (May-June 1996), 77-96.

¹¹² Yelena Sergeyevna’s, diary, 12 May 1936, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 235.

¹¹³ M.A. Bulgakov to Yosif Stalin, 30 May 1931, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 128.

thought that when he met Stalin, he only needed to personally articulate the injustices he has suffered in order for Stalin to attend to fixing them. Proffer again seems to run counter to the opinion of this paper when she states, "His detractors sometimes like to imply Bulgakov admired Stalin"¹¹⁴. Based on the evidence, it seems Bulgakov did have some admiration for Stalin, and if not, he defiantly was dependent on him to a degree. Too many biographers of Bulgakov try to make Bulgakov out to be a bigger hero than he was.

Another figure that demonstrated the father Stalin ideology was Pasternak who did not believe Stalin knew of the excesses of the secret police under Yezhov.¹¹⁵ Yet Pasternak was not the only figure who had various feelings on Stalin, the father Stalin complex was promoted by the Soviet government through the promotion of the Cult of Personality. This propaganda likely made it hard for a citizen of the USSR to draw a true picture of Stalin at the time.

Additional appeals

Despite all the trouble Bulgakov continued to have, even after Stalin helped him, he still requested help from Stalin, and though it seems Stalin never again directly communicated with Bulgakov, perhaps the perception of the father Stalin figure encouraged Bulgakov to continue making appeals.

On August 5 1930, Bulgakov wrote another appeal to Stalin shortly after the phone call. "I would not have allowed myself to bother you with a letter if I was not force to do so by my poverty" I'm asking you, if it is possible, to take me in the first part in may" (audience with Stalin) " I don't have any means of survival"¹¹⁶ On 30 May 1931, Bulgakov wrote a letter to Stalin again asking Stalin if he could go abroad, but only for a short period because he felt he

¹¹⁴Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 392.

¹¹⁵ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 474.

¹¹⁶Bulgakov to Stalin, 5 August 1930, in Sakharov, Михаил Булгаков : писатель и, 435.

“cannot remain there.”¹¹⁷ He requested that he be able to take the trip because he could “recognize the value of Russia only from outside of Russia”

Bulgakov himself did not make the final appeals for himself; it seems three of Bulgakov friends made an appeal on his behalf.¹¹⁸

Often with emotional thankfulness reminisced about his talk with Stalin ten years ago, about the talk that breathed into him new power. Seeing him dying, we, friends of Bulgakov, cannot not tell you, Alexander Nikolaivich, about his situation, with hope, that you will find it possible to tell about this to Stalin.¹¹⁹

In addition to his friends, Bulgakov’s wife asked Stalin to call Bulgakov to give Bulgakov new strength.¹²⁰

All these appeals to Stalin seem to indicate that Bulgakov constantly had some reliance on Stalin and hope that he would be his salvation. It is apparent that those close to him felt this way to.

Other interventions

Their may have been some cause for Bulgakov to hold on to the hope of another great intervention on his behalf on the part of Stalin. One major reason why Bulgakov may not have given up hope on Stalin’s assistance is the numerous positive events that occurred around *The Days of the Turbins*. It was reinstated in February 1932, and his joy at this event is articulated to Pavel Popov in a letter.¹²¹ Also, years later in Yelena Sergeyevna’s diary on March 27 1934 states that according to Yegorov “that amongst the members of the Government the *Days of the*

¹¹⁷M.A. Bulgakov to I.V. Stalin, 30 May 1931, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 106.

¹¹⁸Качалов ,Hmelev, Tarasova to Alexander Nikolaivich Poskrebyshv, in Sakharov, Михаил Булгаков : писатель и, 440.

¹¹⁹IBID.

¹²⁰ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 498.

¹²¹M.A. Bulgakov to Pavel Popov, 25 January-24 February 1932, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 136.

Turbins is considered to be an outstanding play.” Even as late as the 29 of November 1934 Stalin still personally went to Showings of the Day of the Turbins.¹²²

At the very least, it seems Bulgakov’s wife felt Stalin was behind the many rumors of revivals of plays that they had experienced though the years. As noted in her 19 November 1936 diary entry after the censoring of *Moliere*, Stalin was reported to have remarked. “What is this about another play of Bulgakov’s being taken off? It’s a pity; he is a talented author.”¹²³

According to her, “It seems quite plausible. Otherwise it would have be difficult to explain all these conversations and suggestions about revivals.”¹²⁴

It seems that even during Bulgakov’s time people believe Stalin’s actions seem to be behind Bulgakov’s preservation despite all the problems Bulgakov continued to encounter. Unfortunately, it cannot be certain whether Stalin actually said these things, because the accounts are through 2nd or 3rd person perspectives that are not overly reliable. Yet, this explains why Bulgakov continued to make appeals and hoped that Stalin would help him. If only he could personally meet with him or at least that, a letter would finally allow him to leave.

A final appeal that Bulgakov did not make on his behalf, was for a friend who was in exile. On the 4th of February 1938, Bulgakov wrote to Stalin requesting that his friend Erdman be allowed out of exile.¹²⁵ Apparently, he was back at work in 1941 and it is interesting to note that he was allowed back shortly after Bulgakov’s death.

Bulgakov’s uniqueness amongst his contemporaries

There were many writers repressed in Russia during the time of Bulgakov. It interesting to note that Bulgakov, who was essentially anti- Bolshevik, out survived many who were loyal to

¹²²Yelena Sergeyevna’s, diary, 29 November 1934, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 187.

¹²³Yelena Sergeyevna’s, diary, 19 November 1936, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 243.

¹²⁴Ibid

¹²⁵ M.A. Bulgakov to Yosif Stalin, Moscow, 4 February 1938, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 266.

the party and belonged to party literary organizations. Babel is an example of a socialist aligned fellow traveling writer who originally supported the revolution and ended up dying in the camps. Part of this may have resulted from Babel complaining about the stifling atmosphere of the literary environment. It is believed that he said something in a meeting that got him arrested. Yet, unlike Bulgakov who was a conservative, Babel was accused of being a Trotskyite. Despite being at the minimum a socialist Babel still felt oppressed. "Like everyone else in my profession, I am oppressed by the prevailing conditions of our work in Moscow; that is, we are seething in a sickening professional environment devoid of art or creative freedom."¹²⁶

Babel further explained this oppression in the context of Mayakovsky. "We interpreted Mayakovsky's suicide as the poet's conclusion that it was impossible to work under soviet conditions"¹²⁷. This kind of interpretation also reflects back on the Bulgakov-Stalin relationship, in that Stalin chose to spare Bulgakov who was not even socialist when others like Babel were persecuted. Because of Bulgakov's value to Stalin, he had to do something to make the literary environment more livable for him.

This highlights the fact that the literary environment was oppressive for nearly all those who were authors during Stalin's rule, loyal or disloyal. Perhaps the comments that got Babel arrested are these which are in an NKVD file: "We have to demonstrate to the world the unanimity of the Unions literary forces. But seeing how all this is done artificially" it is essentially all lies.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Isaac Babel to Pupik, 12 May 1925, in Isaac *Babel: The Lonely Years, 1925-1939; Unpublished Stories and Private Correspondence*, Tran. Andre R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), 61.

¹²⁷ Isaac Babel, interrogation, 10 June 1939, in Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices*, 48.

¹²⁸ Special Report from the GUGB NKVD SSSR Secret Political Department, *on the progress of the all union Congress of soviet writers*, no later than 31 August 1934, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 169

One reason for Communists being singled out instead of Bulgakov is the fact that they deviated from Party orthodoxy, and as a result, they had to pay. Proffer elaborates on this interpretation; she believes, "The people whom Stalin most hated and feared were those who had been true believers- Communist, or at least leftist, of some stripe."¹²⁹ This may explain things slightly, but it seems those who openly opposed Stalin did not tend to be protected. Yet, the fact that Stalin went after those who only deviated slightly is interesting when looking at the relationship between Bulgakov and Stalin, where it is apparent Bulgakov was as far from party aligned as possible.

Even those who were not true communist and reformed eventually were arrested. Pil'nyak conformed to the new regime, and perhaps for that reason he was arrested. He wrote about shock workers and wrote the "The Volga Falls into the Caspian Sea" in order to make up for his earlier deviation of *Mahogany* which was critical of the true party and painted it as corrupt and painted those who were true believers as now distant from the party¹³⁰. What differentiates Pilnyak from Bulgakov is that he was allowed to emigrate. This occurred when like Bulgakov he wrote a letter to Stalin requesting assistance in 1931. Pilniak stated, "I do not see my fate outside of Revolution,"¹³¹ but he asked to go abroad to so "I can go abroad as a revolutionary writer."¹³² Stalin replied on January 7th and said that he would be allowed to go abroad. Pilnyak was allowed to leave on June 1 1934: "Pilnyak and his wife have received their passports and left."¹³³ Despite leaving, he came back and was executed in 1938. It was a mistake to publish *Mahogany* but it seemed that it was a bigger mistake to come back. So perhaps capitulating completely to

¹²⁹ Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, 473-474 proffer

¹³⁰ B.A. Pilnyak to I.V. Stalin ,4 January 1931, in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 114

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 115.

¹³³ Yelena Sergeevna's, diary, 29 November 1934, in Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 171.

Stalin was bad because in this case it proved to be fatal. Perhaps Bulgakov's stubbornness in not writing a communist play benefitted him.

Pasternak is arguably the most similar to Bulgakov in his actions and was also spared by Stalin. Pasternak refused to support the liquidation of a number of writers during the terror by refusing to sign a supportive letter condemning the writers produced by the Writers Union¹³⁴. In a letter to Stalin, he defended his action: "I could not consider I had the right to be a judge in matters of life and death where others were concerned. To this very day I cannot understand why I was not arrested there and then."¹³⁵ So like Bulgakov Pasternak seemed to be honest with Stalin about his political views. His signature was added anyway, by the Writers' Union, since they "took no chances"¹³⁶. Pasternak also received a phone call much like Bulgakov from Stalin, as mentioned earlier. Stalin apparently stopped the arrest of Pasternak stating, "leave that cloud-dweller in peace!"¹³⁷ This is likely because Pasternak wrote mostly poetry. Yet it seems Pasternak was not as resistant to the government or as targeted as Bulgakov during Stalin's time. He seemed to be critiqued largely for his individualism.¹³⁸

Conclusion

Bulgakov was a special case in the Soviet Union. He chose not to leave Russia when he had the chance, and considering he was so against the government it is surprising he passed up the offer. He may have regretted this decision but by it seems Stalin only offered him emigration once. Yet despite not taking Stalin up on his offer, it is Stalin that likely assured that Bulgakov the unrepentant White sympathizer was not arrested. Bulgakov did not live a

¹³⁴ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 219.

¹³⁵ Olga Ivinskaya, *A captive in Time*, 141-142, **in** Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 219-220.

¹³⁶ Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia*, 220

¹³⁷ Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting*, 149.

¹³⁸ Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin*, 181.

comfortable life and likely died relatively young because of that. Yet, he was allowed to live and continue writing despite the fact very few of his works were appreciated until after his death. Thought it is disturbing to say, we have Stalin to thank for Bulgakov's later works that were not cut short by his early demise at the hands of the government.

Why Stalin protected Bulgakov is complex. It is this protection despite Bulgakov political opinions made Bulgakov a unique writer during the Stalinist era. Bulgakov was a writer that was involved in the literature debate centered on RAPP's prominence and the "fellow traveling" writers who wanted to continue to write without persecution. Stalin interest in Bulgakov in this situation was that he served as a diversion for RAPP and may have served as a role model of quality to Communist writers. Beyond simply being relevant because of being a pawn in a power struggle Stalin appreciated, his work and this appreciation may have been the strongest factor in sparing Bulgakov. Many such as Gorky and his proponents in the government helped defended him within the government but the final decision of protection was made by Stalin.

Bulgakov was unique because Stalin's protection. The protection itself was unique as well. He was protected enough to survive but not to thrive. Bulgakov still suffered in the stiffening literary environment under Stalin like most of the rest of Soviet writers. Yet he still could openly proclaim he was a conservative and could get away with it. This made him unique from his contemporary writers. However, Bulgakov still died naturally but "under the heel" an oppressed writer at the age of 48 in March 1940.

The relevance of this individually story is but one part of a very human history, the plight of Soviet writers. I believe Max Hayward puts it best when he stated, "One day it will perhaps be shown that not only Russia, but the whole world, is indebted to the soviet literature for keeping

alive, in unimaginable conditions, that indefinable sense of freedom which is common to all men"¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Max Hayward, "Introduction," *Dissonant Voices in Soviet Literature* (London, 1962), xlii.